

A Career In Emergency Telecommunications

Do you have what it takes?

A career in 911 – Is it right for you?

Thank you for applying with Westfield Public Safety Dispatch. We'd like to share a few thoughts and raise some difficult questions as you consider employment in the field of emergency telecommunications. More often than not applicants have no clue what a career in emergency telecommunications really entails. What are the duties? What is a "typical" day? What is the schedule? What are the worst calls? All sorts of questions need to be realistically considered before proceeding.

Emergency Telecommunications – a rewarding career.

Becoming an Emergency Telecommunications Dispatcher (ETD) is a step into a job that is intended to become a career, and starts with months of training. There was a day when becoming an ETD was a transient position for future law enforcement officers, fire fighters, or someone just looking for employment experience until something better came along. That is not the case anymore. ETDs play an integral part in public safety and, on occasion, a very direct part in saving a person's life. An ETD has the privilege of having a hand in all areas of public safety. Furthermore, they are the go-to people when citizens, police officers, fire fighters, paramedic, and countless others need help. ETDs are singular in what they do and in the manner they do it. Other career requirements may overlap individual skills a good ETD must embody, but no career embraces the many facets that make up emergency telecommunications. Pay and benefits are very competitive. Ongoing training opportunities are provided throughout an ETD's career. Relations among fellow ETDs can develop into lasting bonds, and there is a special connection to the law enforcement, fire, and EMS agencies they serve. Finally, there is nothing more rewarding than knowing you did everything you possibly could to mitigate a traumatic event for a citizen in desperate need.

Have you ever *really* considered what Emergency Telecommunications is all about?

A common misconception is we are "phone operators." While not entirely untrue, that title is not representative of the depth of responsibility each and every ETD faces. Furthermore, answering the phone will eventually result in exposure to the worst imaginable situations. It will be your responsibility to remain calm, composed, and gather all the necessary information, begin the dispatching process, and remain on the line while listening to deeply disturbing sounds and descriptions. Staying calm, combined with experience and training, will get an ET through the worst of the worst.

You undoubtedly know about the mass shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut and Century Movie Theater in Aurora, Colorado. The general public tends to remember the pictures of the flashing lights, people darting about, and perhaps even some of the radio traffic from the news. What they do not realize is the first person to learn about the shooting is a trained ETD. A human being, whom was expected to gather facts from a

panicked caller, listen to the screams of injured, terrified, and perhaps dying, citizens, continued gunfire from the suspect, put together a complete thought process within specific guidelines, render aid through verbal instructions on the phone and radio, and be the caller's one light of hope in tragic chaos. This is real.

The responsibilities do not end when the phone is disconnected. An ETD is also responsible for incoming and outgoing radio traffic, sometimes simultaneously while on the phone. This means the ETD is expected to hear and understand other radio transmissions, respond appropriately, and not lose track of any important information that may have been conveyed over the phone during that same time frame, even when the caller is screaming for help over the phone. In the industry this is often referred to as "multitasking". It is a very difficult skill to learn, takes months to develop, years to truly master, and more often than not comes from natural ability. Finally, working as an ETD will require the ability to switch from the absolute mundane to "master of disaster" without notice. "Long moments of nothing punctuated by chaos" is a popular description.

What are the duties and necessary skills of an Emergency Telecommunications Dispatcher?

The quick list seems simple enough: answer the phones, and talk on the radio. It is what you are expected to be able to do while on the phone and radio that takes "simple" out of the equation.

ETDs are responsible for answering incoming emergency and non-emergency phone calls. They must swiftly prioritize the call they are processing to determine the appropriate direction for call taking. Obtaining critical information, with no margin for error, is an absolute must and this sometimes must happen within seconds to save a life. While this is taking place another phone is ringing and a field unit may call on the radio. What do you do? You cannot abandon the caller on the phone and focus strictly on the radio. There is the same zero margin for error even if you are on the phone with a hysterical caller. Your coworkers will help when they can but may also be tied up on their own emergency calls. Sometimes, oftentimes, the full responsibility of properly, and simultaneously, responding to the phone call and radio traffic falls squarely on the individual's shoulders. It is a delicate juggling act where dropping the ball can cost lives.

Westfield's ETDs use a Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system to perform many of their duties. Any successful trainee will be able to navigate through the numerous functions within CAD quickly and efficiently. "Entering a call" includes being on the phone with a caller, obtaining the location of the problem from the caller, name and phone number, and succinctly narrating the problem. Under most circumstances the ETD taking an in-progress call is also expected to make the initial dispatch and keep officers updated on critical information while still actively listening to the caller. These updates are also entered into the CAD system by the ETD. While all this is transpiring the ETD must be alert to additional needs from fellow ETDs in the room that may or may not have direct bearing on the in-progress call. Such is the nature of the business and is an example of multitasking.

Other skills, responsibilities, and duties of any successful ETD include strong decision making skills – the sort that requires forethought and clarity even when the demands upon his/her

attention are many and urgent. On the same token, the ability to endure periods of little activity is important; as is the ability to swiftly transition to dealing with a disaster with no warning. Furthermore, there are additional computer systems and networks used in the course of the day including the Criminal Justice Information System, computer based radio and telephone systems, audio recorders, and Emergency Medical Dispatch (EMD) software. The ability to handle a stress is essential. A lack of this ability will greatly abbreviate any ETD's career.

This is by no means an all-inclusive list. The demands placed upon an ETD are high and unforgiving. Are you ready for the challenge?

How much training will you need?

Truly, once upon a time – decades ago, training used to be “that’s the phone, answer it when it rings. That’s the radio, talk to people when they talk to you. Don’t kill anyone.” Thankfully, today’s citizens can count on highly trained people when they require emergency assistance. ETD’s at Westfield’s Public Safety Communications Center must complete a State mandated 40 hour training course, a 16 hour 911 course, and a 24 hour Emergency Medical Dispatch course before starting on the job training. Failure to pass any of these mandated classes will result in termination. Upon successful completion of these classes, on the job training will begin and last from 3 to 4 months on average. Every new ETD trainee finds this process deeply challenging. In all reality, it takes an equally deep determination to deal with the stresses that naturally accompany learning a new job, especially one that lives depend upon.

At the end of each training day the trainee will receive a Daily Observation Report (DOR) which provides a score for numerous categories based on the day’s training and degree of success demonstrated by the trainee. This is a tool used by the trainers to provide feedback and guidance and by the trainees to gauge where they stand in training and prompt them to take the initiative to improve where necessary. The Public Safety Communications Administrator will monitor the progress and periodically meet with the trainee and/or trainer. The trainee is free to discuss, ask questions, and encouraged to explore what can be done to improve during any part of the training and feedback process. If a trainee doesn’t progress, remedial assistance will be provided. However, if remedial actions fail to generate forward progression in training, it will most likely result in separation of employment (termination).

All ETD’s are required to maintain appropriate certifications each year and will be required to attend various training sessions. These courses include such things a 911 liability, stress management, suicide intervention, and numerous other important skills established by the State 911 Department.

What happens in a typical day?

The typical day in a 911 Center is best described as moments of lull punctuated by sudden, unexpected, chaos. There is no real “typical” day in dispatch. An entire shift may pass with no significant events while the next shift may sense that “someone flipped the switch,” the phones never stop ringing, and field units are running from call to call the entire night. The busiest

time of the year for most dispatch centers begins mid to late spring and lasts into September and October. A typical day during the summer months is significantly busier and more chaotic than winter. However, a significant snow storm can take a quiet work day and turn it into the busiest day of the year. There is often no way to predict what direction a day may go.

What shifts/schedule do ETD's work?

Emergency telecommunications is a 24 hour, 365 days a year business. The normal shift for a Westfield ETD employee is 8 hours working a 4 day on, 2 day off rotation. New hires are assigned to a Certified Training Officer (CTO) and will follow that CTO's shift which may be 8am until 4pm, 4pm until 12am, or 12am until 8am. Occasionally the schedule will change to ensure proper staffing levels.

Emergencies do not wait for holidays, birthdays, and important occasions to pass. Such is the job of an ETD. There is allowance for personal time and vacation but, under most circumstances, must be scheduled in advance and meet certain criteria to ensure proper staffing.

Once training is complete, you will be assigned a shift. Westfield Public Safety operates three shifts, days (8-4), evenings (4-12) and midnights (12-8). Shifts are bid by seniority and new hires will likely start on the midnight shift.

Obviously, an employee whom reliably shows up for work is not only important to the center, but also to the public. All of our ETD's understand what it is like to have childcare issues, family time conflicts, to be sick or unexpected emergencies that demand priority. ETDs are expected to have addressed these issues before their shift, when possible. Sometimes there are no other options but to call in for your shift. This requires someone else to fill that spot. An ETD may be called upon, at any time, to fill the need and may work extended hours or come in on a day off (mandated overtime).

What kinds of calls does an ETD encounter?

ETDs answer all phone calls coming into the dispatch center, both emergency and non-emergency. Calls range from the most simple to the horrific. An ETD may start a shift with a call from a citizen inquiring what time the fireworks start and hang up to answer the next line which is a panicked dad whom just discovered the home on fire and he is unable to locate his child. Any given shift will contain calls of all sorts. Emergency medical calls are frequent and commonly vary in from the lowest priority, such as a non-injury lift assist, to the most extreme, a baby not breathing with a panicked-out of control young mother. Same with police calls. Citizens frequently call wanting a police response for a matter that cannot be resolved by law enforcement. For example, imagine a third shifter trying to sleep next to a home that is being remodeled; The noise wakes him up which prompts him to call 911 to ask the police to go over and tell them to stop. It is 10:30 am. The ETD must then explore the situation to see if there is anything law enforcement can help with and, if it becomes clear there is not, help the citizen understand why police are not responding. Typically this results in an angry citizen

demanding things that cannot be appropriately fulfilled and the ETD must remain professional yet firm when conversing with the citizen. Scenarios of this sort are also common and test even the most patient and understanding ETD. Other scenarios are even more demanding, such as an irate, deeply intoxicated, man calling from a family reunion, whom was just involved in a fist fight with his brother; the brother now has retrieved a baseball bat and is chasing the caller. The ETD must not only listen to what the caller has to say, ask very specific questions, but also listen to what is happening in the background for important clues such as names, yells from injured people, or statements from other people that may influence the decisions of law enforcement.

What about the radio?

On many levels the ETD encounters the same rapid shifts of demands as he does on the phones. Most radio traffic, police, fire, and EMS, includes units calling out on scene of a call, clearing the call, and other low level requests. Those request can be rapid fire, from multiple units on different frequencies, and still require an accurate and efficient response. Also, ETD's must be vigilant and always listening for a call for help from one of the field units. A police officer may suddenly find himself fighting with a suspect and needing emergency back-up. A fire chief may need further assistance on a fire that just went from bad to worse or a paramedic may suddenly find herself fighting with a diabetic patient in the back of the ambulance. It is simply impossible to know when such things will demand an ETD's attention.

Stress – a real issue in the career.

Every job is stressful, correct? An ETD's job is not immune. As a matter of fact, a recent article listed the emergency telecommunications career as more stressful than being a surgeon and second only to being a Psychiatric Aide.* Furthermore, recent studies have found ETD's are at risk of developing PTSD* due to stresses they are exposed to in the normal course of the work. As previously mentioned, ETDs are expected to be able to work 8 hour shifts with mandated overtime, any day of the week, holidays, birthdays, and important family events. Family is important and this job can sometimes tax well established relationships.

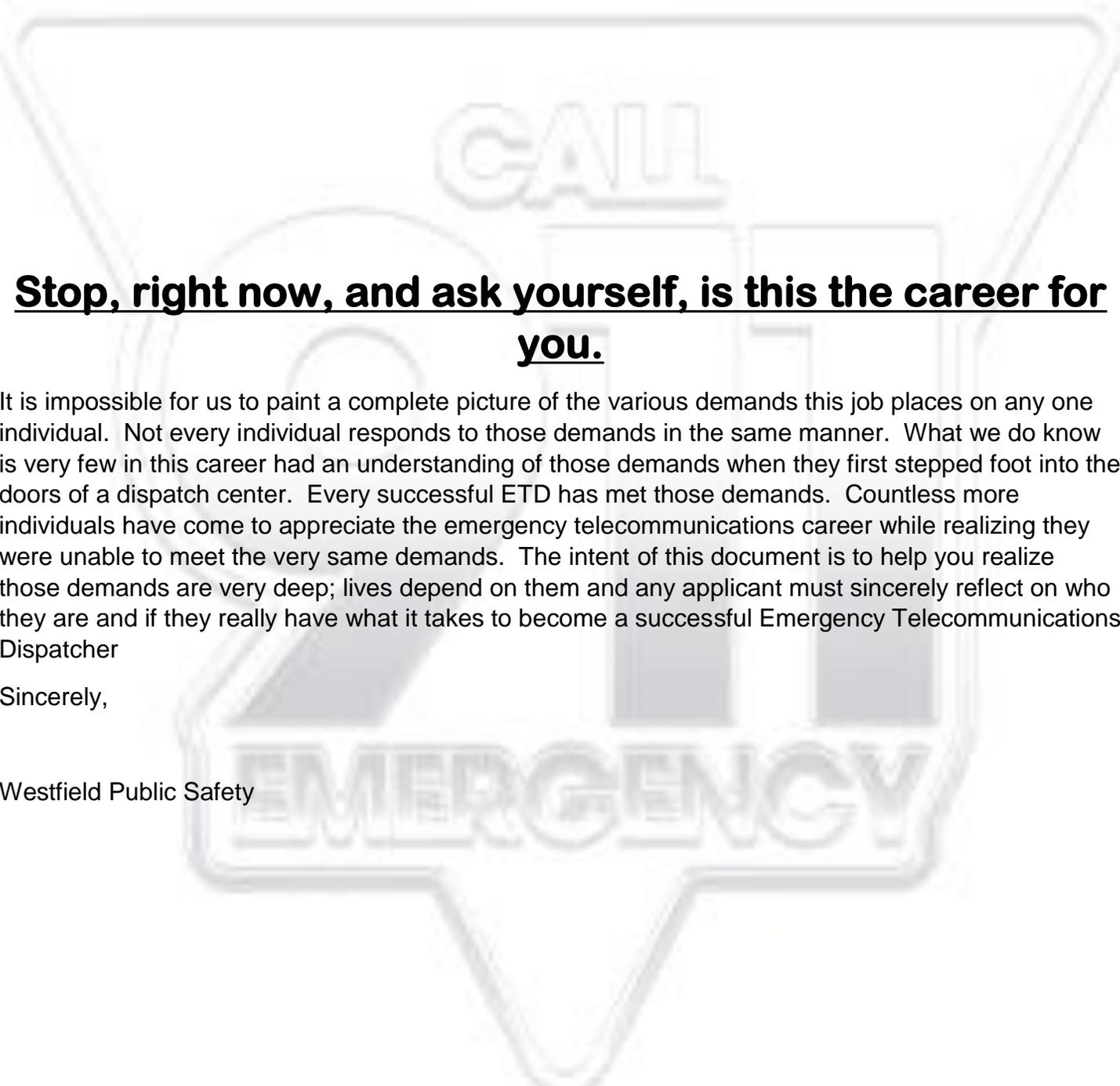
Believe it or not, the physical demands of being an ETD are deeply stressful as well, just in a far more subtle yet sinister way. The job often requires an ETD to remain sitting or standing in a single place for hours on end. Breaks may be limited during busy times in the Center. There are essentially no opportunities to burn off the stress of a bad call or the chili-cheese fries your coworkers talked you into buying for lunch. The body releases certain hormones during times of stress, and as discussed, and ETD is subjected to frequent stressors. The body is designed to work off the hormone and subsequent sugar/fat release through physical activity. These things redeposit inside the body and overtime can lead to health issues. Stress, it is an unavoidable part of life. However, anyone considering a career in emergency telecommunications must know the facts, first. You must truthfully ask yourself, are you ready, willing, and able to handle this stress associated with this career?

The job will change you.

Ask any seasoned ET if they look at the world in the same way they did when they first started the career and you will often hear some startling and candid responses. It takes a special kind of person to control the change, to grow in the career, versus letting it ruin you. Maybe you are offended by strong language and dark humor – a new ETD quickly discovers he is exposed to both and with frequency. The dark humor, also called gallows humor, becomes a coping mechanism where an ETD may seem to laugh at a call that the average citizen would consider decidedly disturbing. ETDs are not robots, devoid of emotion and independent thought process, but they are expected to learn how to process through deeply stressful and disturbing calls, and know when to seek help if needed. Flashes of cynicism and sarcasm sometimes become entrenched in an ET's psyche. This job will change you, period.

I really want to help people!

Being an ETD requires a strong sense of community service as well as a particular sort of dedication that is difficult to find in an average person. A citizen is not having a good day if they are dialing 911. The ETD frequently becomes the receiver of wide ranging insults, misguided demands, and unrealistic expectations of the public safety system. Successful ETDs truly desire to help citizens and often must battle the very people asking for help. The citizen does not understand the need for "all that information" when it is truly crucial to provide the help they require. Callers seldom express appreciation. Often quite the contrary. An ETD is the communications conduit between the public and emergency responders. There can be long stretches that seem very thankless and you may ask yourself, "Why am I doing this?!" ETs contribute to the system. They are key to saving lives but the shine quickly wears off when the phones start ringing yet again. ETs aren't here to save the world but play an important part in the entire process.



Stop, right now, and ask yourself, is this the career for you.

It is impossible for us to paint a complete picture of the various demands this job places on any one individual. Not every individual responds to those demands in the same manner. What we do know is very few in this career had an understanding of those demands when they first stepped foot into the doors of a dispatch center. Every successful ETD has met those demands. Countless more individuals have come to appreciate the emergency telecommunications career while realizing they were unable to meet the very same demands. The intent of this document is to help you realize those demands are very deep; lives depend on them and any applicant must sincerely reflect on who they are and if they really have what it takes to become a successful Emergency Telecommunications Dispatcher

Sincerely,

Westfield Public Safety

Additional Resources

Please take the time to review the information available at the following links. Some resources are provided by agencies not affiliated with Grand Traverse 911 and differences, changes, errors, or omissions to any information is beyond our control. Any statements of specific pay, benefits, hours, and training, work load, and etc., are to be considered examples only and may not specifically apply to the agency of Grand Traverse 911. The information may assist you in determining if a career in 911 is right for you and help you prepare you in the event your are granted an interview. These are small fraction of the sources available.

- **Fox News 17 Article, “What it Takes...”**
<http://fox17online.com/2014/02/04/what-it-takes-to-be-a-911-dispatcher/#0okcd85Q9gayshZU.01>
- **State 911 Department:**
<http://www.mass.gov/eopss/agencies/state-911/>
- **Mayo Clinic Article, “Chronic Stress...”**
<http://www.mayoclinic.org/stress/art-20046037>
- **Dispatch Magazine – Online:**
http://www.911dispatch.com/jobs/job_prepare.html
- **United States Bureau of Labor and Statistics:**
<http://www.bls.gov/ooh/office-and-administrative-support/police-fire-and-ambulance-dispatchers.htm>
- **Cobb County 911 Recruiting Video:**
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grskRzIqRIM>
- **Prince George’s County Recruiting Video:**
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=edHK_i9fhzw

*Business Insider, “The 14 Most Stressful Job In America”, Nov, 12, 2013

*Huffington Post, “911 Dispatchers At Risk For PTSD, Study Finds”, Mar 29, 2012